

Paper Two: 'What do Mental Health Family Members and Friends Need?'

April 2021

Our position on the needs of people supporting someone experiencing mental ill health and or substance misuse is informed by the lived experience of mental health family members and friends.

Mental health family members and friends seek education and training opportunities, service navigation support, peer support, opportunities for advocacy (both self and systemic), financial support and recognition as an equal care partner in a person's mental health or substance misuse recovery journey.

Family members and friends form part of a consumer's natural support network. They play a fundamental role in maximising a consumer's health and wellbeing, including recovery from mental ill health. As recognised in the *Rethink 2020 State Plan for Mental Health in Tasmania (2020-2025)* (Rethink Plan), families and friends have their own particular support, education and training needs. Further, engaging support people in the care and treatment of a loved one is paramount to recovery-orientated health care provision¹.

Training & Education

*The Economic Value of Informal Mental Health Caring in Australia Report*² provides the first known estimate of the economic value of informal mental health care in Australia. The results of this study demonstrate that mental health families and friends add significant economic value to the Australian Mental Health System, and that support people are filling in gaps between consumer services in Australia. However, as outlined by one study participant, support people "often don't have the skills to cope with someone who is unwell with mental illness". This sentiment was reflected in family and friend responses to the *MHFFTas Survey for Friends, Families and Carers of People with Mental Ill Health (2018-19)* and the *2018 I Care Campaign*:

"I look after my care recipient, often on a on a day-to-day basis, without training, knowledge of mental illness or practical and emotional support, or indeed, acknowledgment of my own needs and mental health."

Families and friends tell us that they require more information and training in their supporting role. Further, our stakeholders view education as essential in "stamping out stigma around mental ill health".

The need to provide community members with skills to cope and react to various forms of mental ill health and trauma has heightened since the COVID-19 Pandemic. In response, MHFFTas has offered Mental Health First Aid and Conversations About Suicide Training, supported by the Tasmanian Government and Public Health Tasmania, across Tasmania to families and friends. We aim to empower ordinary people to be first responders and encourage community members to access conversations before they break down. In addition to community wide education, MHFFTas provides workshops and education on specific mental illnesses, as well as self-care, boundary setting, communication and relationship management. All workshop topics are guided by family and friend feedback.

MHFFTas is pleased that the training and support of families and friends is recognised as a key action in the *Rethink Plan*: "[work to] increase the capacity of consumers, carers and families to participate in the service

¹ *Rethink 2020 State Plan for Mental Health in Tasmania (2020-2025)*, p. 23, https://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/419549/Rethink_2020_A_state_plan_for_mental_health_in_Tasmania_20202025.pdf (Rethink Plan)

² Sandra Diminic, Emily Hielscher, Yong Yi Lee, Meredith Harris, Jaclyn Schess, Jan Kealton, Harvey Whiteford (2017), *The economic value of informal mental health caring in Australia: summary report*, Commissioned by Mind Australia, p. 4, https://www.mindaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/publications/The_economic_value_of_informal_mental_health_caring_in_Australia_summary_report.pdf

*system by providing information and training*³ and looks forward to working with the State Government in implementing this action.

Referral Support

We know that the Mental Health and Alcohol and Drug Sectors are difficult to navigate. We also know that it is often the support person who navigates a system on behalf of the person they care for. For families and friends supporting someone experiencing a comorbidity of mental ill health and substance misuse, navigation difficulties are exacerbated by the siloed nature of our health care system and the different models of care adopted within each sector. To reduce the amount of time and energy spent navigating multiple services and delivery models, mental health families and friends seek support from one place.

MHFFTas aims to provide the right support to families and friends at the right place and time. We do this via our online resources for families and friends, alongside our 9-5, Monday to Friday referral telephone service. Family members and friends contact MHFFTas and receive individualised support recommendations for both themselves, and their loved one. Our stakeholders tell us that they value the opportunity to talk and be heard and remind us of the positive impact listening has on an individual's mental health and wellbeing.

Again, we are encouraged that the need to keep services accessible and provide system navigation assistance is recognised as a key action in the *Rethink Plan*: “[ensure that] people experiencing mental illness and their families and friends know how to access mental health care at the right time and in the right place for them”⁴. We look forward to supporting the State Government in implementing this action.

Peer Support

Family members and friends seek opportunities to connect with others who support someone living with mental ill health.

“[It is] wonderful to be in a room with others who understand and who can provide suggestions, skills, and [coping and advocacy] techniques.”

Mental health peer support can bring a range of benefits, including friendship, empowerment, acceptance, stigma reduction, shared learning and insights for recovery⁵. We know that:

- Peer support and sharing of learned wisdom have been recognised by many families and friends as essential in their caring journey.
- People who have ‘been there’ have knowledge and expertise based on their own lived experience. Sharing this knowledge can help others to understand their own experience and move forward.
- Support groups can help to increase families and friends’ social connections, learning, and self-care⁶.

Families and friends have told us that it can be hard to maintain relationships with others as a mental health support person. Lack of acceptance and understanding within social networks can increase isolation for both the support person and the consumer.

“I look after my loved one with mental illness and sometimes I feel angry, confused and alone. It’s hard to reach out and find peers.”

We understand that providing peer support for mental health families and friends is, and should remain, a primary preventative health action within our community.

³ Rethink Plan, p, 13.

⁴ Rethink Plan p, 8.

⁵ Consumers of Mental Health WA . Cloverdale, WA: CoMHWA, 2020. *What is peer support?* <http://www.comhwa.org.au/programs/peer-support/>.

⁶ Ibid.

Advocacy

The *Rethink Plan* aims to increase advocacy support for people with mental ill health and their families and friends, and bring lived experience to the mental health system⁷. MHFFtas supports the State Government in achieving this goal by building the self-advocacy capacity of families and friends and representing their needs and views at a systemic level. We value the lived experience of our community.

On behalf of our stakeholders, MHFFtas is supportive of initiatives to listen to the lived experience voice and allow this voice to inform recovery-based care and improve a person's capacity to represent their own experience. For example, supported by the views of our stakeholders, MHFFtas was a strong contributor to Tasmania's first *Peer Workforce Development Strategy* which recognises that lived experience is an essential component in improving outcomes and experiences for consumers, families, and friends in the mental health recovery journey.

As the peak body for mental health families and friends, we also engage in high-level systemic advocacy and facilitate family and friend engagement by working with Government to place mental health family members and friends (including those supporting someone experiencing substance misuse) on committees and workshops to inform government decision-making, systems reviews and interview processes.

Mental health families and friends tell us that they want their stories to be heard and reflected upon. Our stakeholders are strong advocates for positive change in the Mental Health and Alcohol and Drug Sectors and are generous with their time and experience. Within in this context, the adoption of the State Government's proposed continuum of care which features the voice of people with lived experience of mental ill health, including the voices of the families and friends who support them, would be a positive step forward for our community.

Financial Support

Mental health families and friends experience financial hardship as a result of their unpaid support role. Families and friends often forgo employment or education opportunities, or reduce contact hours, in order to provide support. Families and friends regularly finance professional services, incur significant transportation and care provision costs and make changes to living circumstances to best support a loved one. The financial impact of the unpaid support role has been recognised in other Australian jurisdictions. For example, the Carer Support Fund administered on behalf of the State Government by Tandem Carers Victoria. Providing funding or subsidies to assist people in their support role places value on a support person's significant contribution to the health care system and promotes and sustains the support relationship while improving support person wellbeing by reducing financial impact and stress.

We are encouraged by the recognition provided to, and proposed supports for, mental health families and friends in the State Government's current approach to Mental Health Reform. We look forward to working with the next State Government to ensure that families and friends supporting someone experiencing substance misuse receive similar recognition in the Alcohol and Drug Sector. We welcome the opportunity to work with all partners and elected representatives to ensure that the lived experience and needs of mental health families and friends are heard, recognised and met.

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Our Vision

Families and friends of people affected by mental ill health are understood, respected, valued and supported to build their capacities and improve their quality of life.

⁷ p. 13.